When one thinks of the films of Johan van der Keuken, evocative, often disturbing images come to mind. A blind child recreating, in a professional-looking microphone, the noise of a car race he recently “witnessed” (Herman Slobbe/Blind Child 2), a painter in front of an abstract expressionist canvas (A Film for Lucebert). The expressive face of saxophonist Ben Webster, whose wide-open eyes and mouth seem to burst out of his face, just as his face seems to burst out of the frame (Big Ben/Ben Webster in Europe). A young peasant girl, on the small Spanish island of Formentera, holding a rope in her hand, fastened to a donkey that circles her in an endless farming task, while the girl, to save energy, stands motionless; instead of following the animal’s movements with her body, she simply shifts the rope from hand to hand, behind her back, as the donkey changes position (The White Castle). A woman revealing an unexpected wrinkle when she cuts her hair (The Door). An elderly woman, painstakingly climbing the stairs of an apartment house in Italy; later, in the same film, a priest in shabby civilian clothes holding a neon light in front of a working woman, so the filmmaker could shoot inside the workshop (The Way South). People rolling in the mud, some awkward, some graceful (Time). A little boy in a Hong Kong street, fascinated by an electric game in which three plastic penguins climb stairs one after the other, while the boy’s mother, busy and distracted, tries to pull him away (I Love $). Powerful, often disturbing images, that remain engraved in the memory of anybody who has ever experienced van der Keuken’s work. Yet, only images. Images from which something is missing. As Marc Chevrie pointed out, “Cinema is not the image, it is the recording of a moment,” and what we call “cinema” (as opposed to television, MTV or advertising) is made against the fetishization of the “image value” created/imposed by the audiovisual market.¹ Our memory tries to retain such images as the only fragments of the Real we can grasp, but van der Keuken’s dialectical, playful and rigorous approach works against the grain of memory-hoarding, nostalgia, hagiography. Which is why his films are difficult to remember, but why also each subsequent viewing is a renewed pleasure, during which new angles and unexpected details are discovered. Initially a photographer, van der Keuken turned to filmmaking with the full acceptance of his new medium’s double challenge: the passage of time—in which each image is “annihilated” (his word) by the one just after it—and the constant necessity/desire/temptation to reframe. At the end of The Way South, his voice on the soundtrack simply concludes: “It is difficult to touch the Real,” and he likes to describe his camera as an imperfect tool to reach that goal. For the shooting of The Way South, he replaced his rather heavy (16kg) Arriflex camera with an Aaton, but even this more flexible instrument, which “dances” with the filmmaker, bears its own limitations, its own balance between “the desire and the refusal to film,” introducing in the process of representation what van der Keuken calls “a split.”² He continues, “If everything could be filmed, that would be sheer horror: duplication and crushing of the imagination, complete totalitarianism.” So van der Keuken’s method of shooting embodies this permanent anxiety, that at any given moment, the angle, the framing, the perspective, may not be the right one,
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by Bérénice Reynaud

that something more important is happening at the edge of, or outside the frame. Hence, a free-floating approach to framing, both rigorous in its search and playful in its execution.

For me, the doubt about the Real of one’s film has two causes. First, a belief that the Real is not a given, that it has to be suggested between the images: images are nothing but fragments, traces, bits of evidence, of something that has remained elsewhere. Second, a process takes place in the spectator’s mind, that consists of de-realizing these images from the Real to, paradoxically, prove their reality, or to the contrary, their artificiality. Which is why, even though I refuse the distinction between documentary and fiction, I do not say that my films are “fiction films”. I’d rather say that they are artificial. Either the image is stolen from the “real world,” or it is artificially constructed, “staged,” and that creates an energetic process that, eventually, produces fiction. The fictional space is always in the spectator’s mind, and, if that energetic process does not take place, the film simply dies. But it is very clear to me that what is at stake in documentary is a struggle with the form to reach a fictionalization of the image—through the filming process itself and its physical aspects, the editing, the rhythm, etc.

Van der Keuken’s approach to framing is not only motivated by a creative doubt about the nature of “the Real,” but also by an implicit questioning of his own mental processes, of the role he plays in the construction/distribution of “knowledge.” So a comparison can be drawn between his films and those of Trinh T. Minh-ha, who also subverts the boundaries between “documentary” and “fiction.” Her films often convey the impression that the camera is placed in “the right spot”: this placement, however, is not the result of an authoritarian process that would decide “the truth” of the moment, but of a slowly acquired mutuality with her “subjects.” I am thinking in particular of a shot in Naked Spaced: Living is Round, in which a West African woman bends down to tie her turban and adjust her pagne: neither too close nor to far, the camera provides a sense of intimacy without being voyeuristic. What makes possible Minh-ha’s intimate gaze is that she is a woman of color looking at another woman of color, albeit from another culture. Yet, while her position in the ideological landscape allows Minh-ha an access to what is denied to van der Keuken (a “right spot” for her camera), it is also non-essentialist and defines a “horizontal vertigo,” in which “identity is the multiple layer whose process never leads to the True Self, or to Woman, but only to other layers, other selves, other women.” On the other hand, van der Keuken’s position, embodying the “white man’s burden,” could very well be summarized by the first part of Trinh’s statement: “The master is made to recognize that His Culture is not as homogeneous, not as monolithic as He once believed it to be. He discovers...that He is just an other among others.” For a First World filmmaker who has chosen as a subject “the effects in the South of the policy decided in the North, unequal exchange, ecological disaster” — who has taken his camera into the Third World (Peru, Egypt, India) or into the poverty pockets of industrialized countries (U.S. ghettos, immigrant neighborhoods of Paris, countrysides in Southern Italy)—for a fully sighted man filming a blind boy or a white man trying to capture the life of an exiled black sax player—there is simply no “right spot.” In addition, van der Keuken takes risks with his own displacement, his own alienation: when he interviews a Wall Street operator in I Love $, the only position of mastery left for him is irony (“Does
money give you pleasure?"); in the socioeconomic game, facing a man who controls millions of dollars, he is just an insignificant schmuck. It is also his stubbornness, his sense of irony, that allows him not to take his "subjects" for victims, neither patronizing them nor retreating when they resist. In The Way South, for example, an old peasant couple growing lavender in the south of France smilingly refuse to talk to him. (Is it because he does not ask the "right questions" or because they do not care to be interviewed for a movie?) Instead of turning off the camera or editing out the sequence, van der Keuken includes about fifteen minutes of this awkward intercourse in the texture of the film. We have there a true "collision" with the Real, which is also a "missed encounter": the Real is fleetingly "touched" at the very moment it resists and refuses itself. But resistance is, from the outset, present in the body of the filmmaker, who intervenes as a foreign element, in the territories he intends to explore with his camera. Physical resistance: when the camera was too heavy for his arm, he couldn’t get all the shots he wanted. Fictional resistance: it is impossible to grasp the Real without interference from one’s own mental space (memories, dreams, constructions). Which is why van der Keuken often introduces autobiographical fragments "in the interstices" of these other fragments "stolen" from the Real. In I Love $, for example, a film about the circulation of desire and money between Amsterdam, Geneva, New York, and Hong Kong, there is an allusion to a sexual episode in the filmmaker’s childhood, and a moving shot of him and his wife, both middle-aged, in naked embrace.

There is the resistance of objects to one another. The resistance of stupidity to intelligence—of our stupidity to our intelligence. There is the resistance of our instincts to our thoughts, but also the resistance of our “rules of the game,” of our education, of our inhibitions, to our enjoyment (jouissance). In comparison with that of Straub-Huillet, my cinema is more “impure,” more “polluted” with all sorts of questions, but there is one point about which I totally agree with them: at the moment the film resists its own reception by the spectator, you have the beginning of another form of communication, which wouldn’t be possible otherwise.”

Van der Keuken, as proven by the lavender-growing peasants sequence, is not afraid of holding a shot for a seemingly unbearable length of time. Yet, he often “cuts” a shot before the spectator has time to indulge in an aesthetic contemplation, which disturbs some (Jean Rouch at the Paris premiere of I Love $ deplored the fact that van der Keuken did not linger on an “exquisitely beautiful shot of Amsterdam under the snow”). Let’s go back to some of these fascinating images retained by our memory and see what inner resistance they embody. The girl and the donkey in Formentera, for example. What attracted me in this image was its simplicity, its stubbornness. The girl had a job to do, a boring one, and didn’t intend to expend more energy than necessary. She didn’t care about being filmed, about being “graceful” in what she was doing, she didn’t even offer herself to the gaze of the camera, as so many people do is so called “objective” documentaries. Her back turned to us, she was a closed book, and the hieratic nature of the composition, with the donkey slowly circulating around her, was somehow theatrical.
(though I didn’t think it was “staged”). Yet, I had the feeling that something very precious, unique and intimate was communicated to me: the value, the urgency of the labor performed by this young girl whose face I couldn’t even see. What it meant for the survival of the people on the island, its role in their desire to go on living. Like most spectators, I became obsessed by an image; I lost myself inside the boundaries of the frame, which means I virtually hallucinated this shot: it became part of “my” memories, “my” dreams, “my” desires. Later, in a further conversation with van der Keuken, he pointed out that this “pious” memory of mine was omitting, if not the essential, at least something very important that was taking place outside the frame of the shot (after, or before, in another shot): the circle described by the donkey was paralleled by other circles drawn in the island (by mills, or water pumps), or was part of the overall structure of the film, that connected Columbus, Ohio, to Formentera and to Holland. Memory proceeds by increments, and the emotional “fetishization” of images tends to reduce them to “still life,” to sever their dialectical connections. Johan van der Keuken’s cinema displaces our mental habits, which is why it often encounters a (fruitful) resistance in the spectator (and why it is so pleasurable to see his films more than once). The “images” retained by our imperfect memories, once decoded, offer a second level of reading. They all embody tension, conflict, the passage of time. Even the classical shot of the painter posing in front of the oeuvre is “subverted” by the use of an animation device through which the different stages of the painting appear like ironical cartoons. The tension itself is not reducible to what happens within the confines of the screen. In the case of Lucebert, for example, “real” class and historical tensions are brought into the film, expanding and revitalizing the struggle of the man and his canvas. The little boy in Hong Kong sees what his mother does not see: a “marvelous” toy, the very embodiment of his desire. He, in turn, does not see what she’s up to: bargaining the price of vegetables on the market (buying food with the money that could be spent on the toy). But he does not even ask her to buy it for her: he’s in the pure realm of desire, while she, at this moment, is caught in the world of supply and demand: a metonymy for the “circulation” which is the subject of the film.

The symbolic aspect of my work is not always perceived by the spectator. I go through symbols to go back to a more intense, more descriptive, perhaps more difficult perception of the Real. There is a multiplicity of levels, for I cannot posit myself at a purely materialistic one. The material/materialistic aspect of things is like a tool for understanding what is happening in the world. There is also a speculative aspect, which I cannot entirely refuse, even if I shouldn’t do “too much” with it, and always keep it in its just perspective. At the same time, I am very anxious about, well, perfection, i.e., I would like to be able to show something with utter clarity. Yet, I am completely aware that I am a filmmaker working with approximation…Yes, you might say that there is an element of playfulness in my work, that film is a “construction toy” for me, but, at the same time, there are things that are so real and so powerful that they cannot be mastered. Hence, we enter the realm of approximation. I cannot accept the perfect “shot/reverse angle shot as the “truth” of a film. Something in me despairs over never being able to “say the right thing.”
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iii The italicized quotes are fragments of unpublished interviews conducted between the author and the filmmaker.
iv The concern for the “right spot” of the camera is also crucial for Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet, two filmmakers often referred to by van der Keuken.
vi Serge Daney, Liberation. 2 mars 1982.